



PRESENTING THE CHAMPION
HEREFORD BULL AND
MARKING HER 94TH
BIRTHDAY AT THE 1939 SHOW

Isabella Whitney,

SHORTHORN BREEDER AND
GRAND WOMAN OF THE WEST

(1845-1941)

It's a truism that when times get tough in rural Australia, the women on the land step up. But in the past, disaster was sometimes a woman's only opportunity to show her full mettle and take charge.

Anyone looking at a photo of Isabella Whitney as a young woman would see she was no shrinking violet. Taken early in her marriage, the photo shows a girl with a plain, strong face. Her gaze is penetratingly

steady. Indeed, she appears utterly unflappable.

As an eighteen year old, Bella chose a husband who was 19 years her senior. Franklin Whitney was a Canadian immigrant; a quiet man, but amiable. He was also a partner in the rapidly

expanding coaching firm, Cobb & Co. The complex doings of the company would control their lives for decades, bringing property and fortune on paper, but also the threat of ruin. When Frank died and the shaky foundations of the business were revealed, it fell to Bella to

untangle the mess. Though it took years, it was the making of her. Along the way, she would become the most celebrated female exhibitor of Shorthorn cattle in the history of the RAS.

BEGINNINGS

Set up in 1853 by Freeman Cobb and three other Americans, Cobb & Co catered to the growing transport demands of the Victorian goldfields. It passed through a number of hands for half a dozen years until a consortium of seven took over, headed by another American, James Rutherford. Frank Whitney was part of that group, although how he raised his share of the capital is unclear. His background was humble, so presumably, he'd had luck at the diggings.

Rutherford was an alarmingly energetic character, addicted to making deals. He habitually dashed across hundreds of miles of coaching routes to oversee every aspect of operations.

The company needed to be nimble to respond to the boom and bust cycle of new goldfields and to stay ahead of the railways. Cobb & Co moved into New South Wales and Queensland and

Equally at home in the paddock or mixing with politicians, Bella was always cool, calm and collected... and as a pioneering woman on the land she certainly had to be in order to survive.

Rutherford set up an administration centre and large workshops in Bathurst. The company began stabling horses at the White Horse Hotel where Bella lived with her publican aunt. This is probably where Frank Whitney met Bella Leeds. Bella's origins were humble too: she was an orphan, and the granddaughter of a convict woman, although that was no doubt kept secret.

James Rutherford was clever and sought to control all the inputs to the business, establishing a coach-building factory and buying a network of properties to breed horses and grow feed. Cattle and sheep grazing became lucrative too; and as a hedge against the railways, investments were also made in coal and iron ore mines.

Shortly after their marriage in 1863, Frank and Bella went to run Buckiinguy, a

vast company station in the remote Macquarie Marshes, stocked with 100,000 cattle.

Not yet 20 when she arrived, Bella needed all her resourcefulness to survive the conditions. Supplies were received twice a year by bullock wagon. Bad luck if anything was forgotten. At Buckiinguy, Bella had six of her eleven children. Given the extreme isolation, it seems remarkable that only one child died while they were there.

A NEW HOME

In 1875 the Whitneys moved to Orange so Frank could more directly assist with administration. Six years later Cobb & Co purchased Coombing Park, near Carcoar, and the family shifted onto land again. Established by Sir Thomas Icelly back in 1826, the prestigious property was one of

the first land grants west of the Blue Mountains. Icelly was a president of the Agricultural Society of New South Wales (1865-67) and known for his scientific farming methods. Three hundred of his merinos, bred from Macarthur's stock, went with the sale.

Frank Whitney was good with animals and worked hard to improve Coombing, fencing the 10,000 acre run and using multiple methods to tackle an ongoing rabbit plague. A copper mine on the property employing over 20 men also required his oversight.

By now, Cobb & Co's business empire was vast. It owned over 11,000 square kilometres of land, returning an annual profit of about £80,000; coaching contributed an additional £12,000. Only two of the original partners were left: Rutherford, with a two-thirds stake, and Frank. They should have been comfortably rich, but in truth, there were massive debts and strings of mortgages that Rutherford added to, often without consultation, and seemingly on a whim. His convoluted financial juggling was hard to keep track of. Eventually, the strain got to Rutherford and he slipped into a depression so deep it turned suicidal. Though it's speculation, it's possible he was bi-polar.

Keeping news of his illness quiet was crucial to maintaining confidence in the business, so Rutherford was whisked away by a daughter on a voyage to the US. In a matter of months, he recovered, only to return to worsening economic conditions. A massive loan of £50,000 was required to keep Cobb & Co from collapse. With grave misgivings, Frank agreed to the mortgaging of Coombing Park.

DISASTER STRIKES

As the 1890s ticked over, drought and a dire economic depression took hold of the nation. Banks collapsed and Cobb & Co's accounts were frozen. Only further loans from a former partner kept the business going.

Then Frank sickened. He was operated on for an abscess of the liver but died from infection eight weeks later. He was 68. Bella, aged 49, was left with a mountain of trouble and seven children still to raise. Not only that, her hands were tied. Frank had left his share of Cobb & Co to her, but his will stipulated that she must receive it converted into money. Rutherford had no cash to buy her out, and it was the worst time to be selling assets. For Bella to retain her share

in property, the will would have to be legally challenged. That would take organising. In the meantime, it was agreed that Bella and Rutherford would continue to run the business as partners.

Although Bella had good advice from her co-executors, there was no doubt as to who the decision maker was on the Whitney side. Rutherford demanded she hire a man to run Coombing Park, but she refused. She supervised it herself, appointing her 22 year old son as the manager under her. The pressure on her was immense. The drought, which became known as the Federation Drought, was the worst in the country's history so far; and rabbits continued to be a menace; Cobb & Co was on the verge of bankruptcy; and Rutherford was falling into another terrible depression, one which would see him hospitalised. What's more, solicitors advised that an act of parliament was required to change the law before Frank's will could be validly challenged. But the political landscape was in a state of flux with terms still being settled for the federation of the colonies.

MANAGEMENT MATERIAL

During Rutherford's absence, Bella ran Cobb & Co with his appointed power of attorney. Hours a day were taken up with business correspondence and would be for many years. Bit by bit Bella built up a clearer picture of the company's complex assets and Rutherford's sometimes slippery dealings. When he resumed his role she insisted on countersigning all cheques. And when she had doubts about the probity of arrangements at the ironworks they owned, she called in auditors. A discrepancy of £20,000 was found and she sued. The matter was settled out of court in Bella's favour for a much smaller sum. Though it sometimes took lawyering-up, negotiation between them always remained possible.

By excellent management, Bella gradually turned the Coombing Park finances around. So much so that by 1900 she was able to build a new homestead,

replacing the original twelve-room home with a thirty-two-room mansion.

Bella was now highly respected in business and political circles. (Lobbying continued regarding the will.) Many influential men were among the visitors to Coombing, including Edmund Barton, who was a friend and destined to be the nation's first prime minister. Perhaps at his request, Bella and two of her daughters were invited to attend the opening of the first federal parliament.

In 1902 the Whitney Estate Act finally passed as a private members Bill through the NSW legislature. Cobb & Co assets could now be formally split, with Bella retaining Coombing Park and another property in Queensland.

BOSS COCKY

Now Bella was free to pay even more attention to agricultural matters at Coombing. This may have increased tension between mother and son, for in 1907 the Whitney Pastoral Company was formed with Bella as managing director. Her son cashed out his share and bought Waugoola Station, near Woodstock. At around this time, a stud flock of sheep was established at Coombing, and a stud herd of Shorthorns followed. Bella personally supervised the Shorthorns. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, her judgement and expertise were repeatedly proved in the showring. Coombing's cattle attracted many prizes and the interest of international buyers, who were keen to splurge thousands of pounds on Bella's bloodlines. At the Sydney Royal Easter Show Bella became a much admired figure. There, at the age of 93, she finally achieved her lifelong ambition, winning the Shorthorn Male Championship with the sire Aldsworth Royal Prince (imp.). Loud cheers filled the ring when she claimed the prize.

In those final years of her life, Bella was always good for a newspaper story at Showtime. The 'Grand Old Lady of the West', they called her in headlines above photos that showed her white-haired and

Leading the early charge for women, and indeed working mothers, Bella challenged the norms of society... and no matter how long it took, her perseverance meant she was often victorious



WATCHING SHORTHORN JUDGING FROM HER CAR, ALONGSIDE SIR GRAHAM WADDELL, 1938

diminutive, but still keen-eyed and self-possessed. She told reporters it was very easy to look after one's own property after the first fifty years. Cattle were very like children, she opined. 'You must be firm, but you must always try to understand them, and have sympathy with their tantrums.' She did not say this frivolously. It was her view that women brought up on the land were better judges of stock than men, 'because they are gifted with keener perception for detail and more sympathetic understanding.'

When Bella died in 1941, aged 96, she was survived by four daughters. To honour her, the Whitney Pastoral Company sponsored a memorial perpetual trophy in her name for many years, for the Grand Champion Beef Shorthorn Bull. The Company continues to operate today, as does Coombing, run by Bella's great, great grandson, George King.

Bella's pioneering spirit is perhaps best summed up by the answer she gave to a curious Coombing Park visitor in 1934, "Nothing is ever too hard," she said, "when one knows how to do it."

Upon her death, tributes flowed. While the Shorthorn cattle industry lauded her for her outstanding influence on the breed, others remarked on her astuteness, her charm, her forward thinking and spirit, evident even in later years. Others remembered her generosity during the worst of the Great Depression when she fed the numerous men on the road who passed by Coombing. The Cobb & Co days were noted in relation to her husband, but Bella's active role in the business went unmentioned.

In more recent years, one delightful aside about Bella has emerged. It seems she was an early adopter of the motor car, perhaps because she had been rattled a good deal in cart and coach in her day. She bought her first vehicle, an Austin, in 1910. This was replaced a few years later with a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. She never drove herself but had a chauffeur. At her instruction he would drive out into the paddocks so she could survey her land up-close; land she had worked so hard to retain. ■